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Summary of interviews with

CHARLIE ROMER

on 7 and 21 March;

and 24 April 2013

by Allison Murchie

Recording available on CD

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OH 1006/13 **CHARLIE ROMER**

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Log Summary

Charlie Romer

Interviewed by Allison Murchie

OH 1006/13

NB: Zoo or AZ means the Adelaide Zoological Society now known as Zoos SA. MZ means Monarto Zoo	
Card Number	
Card 1 7.3.13	**Charles John Romer** born 3.12.58 in **Manchester, England**; parents **Jack** and **Pam Romer**, one brother 2 sisters; father was a textile salesman who worked mainly in **Europe** for 3-7 days at a time; mother a part-time physiotherapist; local zoo was **Belle Vue Zoo** which he visited several times before it closed in 1967 [1977]; **David Taylor** the Zoo vet came from there; they were important for developing zoo policy and politics; bird keeping was very big in the **UK,** it was a working class hobby, mainly pigeons, canaries and budgies; many of his friends had aviaries and were members of bird clubs; even though he could not keep them at home he developed an early interest in birds; **The Cage and Aviary Birds** newsletter was the zoo bible for birds; he played a lot of sport, mainly soccer and cricket; visited **Chester Zoo** which was about 30 miles from home – loved the macaws and the parrot house which allowed birds to go both indoors and outdoors, also had tropical birds, owls as well as large range of mammals; gold finches and green finches were very popular in **Britain**; family wasmiddle class but not wealthy, had a family holiday every year; had a happy childhood; not very academic but enjoyed economics, art and geography; went to **Parrswood Comprehensive** which had about 1600 students, co-educational; wanted to get a trade through the **City Guild** and went to college to study cooking; interested in motor bikes and speedway; at school wanted to do farming but talked out of it by his parents; did apprenticeship as a chef in Manchester and then worked in **London**; 4 year apprenticeship; he was quick, organised and enjoyed working with his wits, needed good time management; in Britain he worked in large hotels including **British Rail Midland,** a very luxurious hotel in **Manchester**; he got a job at the **Savoy Hotel** in London, did French cooking, loved the way things were made especially the sauces; he did

	work experience at the **Trust House Forte** at the **Grande Hotel**; important to sell himself at the interview as to how good a worker he was; worked under a very tough chef; stayed at the Savoy 1 year, very hard work with 12-14 hour shifts and worked 6 days a week in the **River Restaurant**; he was aged 18; the industry magazine was the **Catering Hotel Keeper** which advertised vacant positions; he applied for a job in **Ontario, Canada** and worked in a motel where he worked at all aspects of the job; his father wanted him to study hotel management instead of cooking; worked at the **Toronto Hilton** for a few years; had a good lifestyle and worked at a variety of jobs as well as cooking; stayed in Canada 6 years; did cooking in **Calgary, Toronto** and **London, Ontario**; worked at **Hoagie Carmichael's** doing traditional **American** food – simple food in big serves; friend offered him a job in **Hobart** through **the Recruitment Catering Company**; he became head chef for **O'Brien's** – did large scale catering including the **MCG**; had to go to the UK for his medical first and it was discovered that he had a heart murmur; no visas available for chefs initially but he later got a permanent visa; came to **Australia** in 1984 at the age of 26; helped to set up a hotel in **Hobart**; met his future wife in a pub; stayed in Hobart for one year; they travelled around Europe for 6 months; they caught the bus to **Perth** and he got a cooking job at **Meekatharra** in the **Pilbara** at **Bavack Mines** (gold mine); worked 70-80 hour week and got paid $720 a week and saved $20,000 in 9 months; truckie paid about $50,000 a year at the mine; his wife did relief teaching at **Bussleton**; returned to Hobart and he no longer did cooking work; was a postman for about 4 years; kept a few birds at home.
Card 2 21.3.13	He was a postie for 5-6 years; he kept birds at home; did weekend volunteer work at **Bonnorong Wildlife Park** then got paid work there at weekends; it was all native animals, most common to **Tasmania**; free ranging birds as well as mixed aviaries; had **Tasmanian Devils**; started at 6.00 am; had 16-18 exhibits; aimed at the tourist market; he worked there 3-4 years; he attended an **ARAZPA** conference in the **Northern Territory**; went to **England** for a holiday in July 1995 and worked as a volunteer at **Chester Zoo** for 2 weeks; worked with primates; made connections with people there and kept in touch when he returned to **Tasmania**; in December the same year the **Head of Primates** at **Chester Zoo** offered him a job in primates; they had just bought a house and had a 3 year old child so his wife stayed in Australia for a year while he went to Chester Zoo; he worked in all areas of the zoo including the **Whipsnade** section which had cheetah, bush dogs, bongos and otters; he also worked with giraffes, carnivores, porcupine,

	gazelle; he stayed there for 2 years and worked in each section 3-4 months; he did all aspects of the keeper job including giving public talks; there was a huge variety of animals; there were 7-8 **Asian** elephants including baby elephants – they had access to indoor and outdoor enclosures; there were fish, birds and squirrels in the exhibit; it was a 4 acre enclosure; most animal enrichment was food based; the exhibit had a waterfall, pond and moat and ha-ha (dry deep moat), he gave public talks from the moat; the exhibits were natural and he learned a lot on the job; elephants had many foot injuries; some were wild elephants from **Burma** and **Thailand**, and others were zoo bred, there were some behavioural issues; there was free contact between the elephants and the keepers and it was always challenging because of the pecking order of the group; tells a story of working with 3 keepers in a barn and how he was nearly killed by one of the elephants; have been many deaths caused by elephants; marriage split up; while in England he rang the curator of **Melbourne Zoo** and got a job there; stayed 8½ years; he lived at the zoo for the first month; he worked with ungulates – zebra, deer, tapir, giraffe, peccary, then elephants, big and small cats; there were many danger issues with the big cats; old facilities; he had a good social life as there were a lot of young people working there – went camping, bush walking and dancing; limited staff turnover; there was a new facility built for the elephants called the elephant trail – the trail told a story and was interactive with the public; they have good bird collection; it took him 4 years to get to work with birds; did not work with reptiles – specialist area and limited opportunities; bird aviaries – 400 metre flight area, habitat areas, broad based; fairy penguins plight was highlighted through work at **Philip Island**; birds were trained for education programs, 2-3 shows a day; got a zoo scholarship to go to **South America** and spent 3 months in **Peru** – in the rainy season worked on rehab, nesting and breeding; went to **Lorro Parque** in the **Canary Islands** for a further 3 months; 350 species; all was on paid study leave; returned to Melbourne Zoo with lots of ideas on how to change aviaries; completely redeveloped aviary with squirrel monkeys, macaws, conures and agoutis – got trees donated and did without great cost; exhibit opened by **Sid Myer**; after 8½ years he was ready for a change; he was tired of fighting to get things done; went to the UK for a holiday; went to **Howletts** in **Canterbury** – they had 55 gorillas, the biggest collection in the world; got job at **Port Lympne Animal Park** working with 21 lowland gorillas.
Card 3 24.4.13	**John Aspinal** was an eccentric gambler and casino owner who set up **Howletts** and **Port Lympne**; Howletts in **Canterbury** was 20 acres and became a large park for hoofed animals; he

	then bought Pt Lympne as an open range zoo for **African** savannah with varieties of primates; 3 acres of woodlands just for **Colobus** monkeys with indoor and outdoor areas; he always put the animals first; only kept endangered species; he bought land in **Gabon**; has the world's largest collection of **Western Lowland Gorillas**; they had 16 black rhinos when Charlie was there and had 4 births; had lemurs and rare baboons; 7 **Malaysian Tapirs** which bred regularly; his job was as curator and animal manager - he was responsible for everything in the zoo from vet care to budgets, uniforms, the animal collection and liaising with other zoos; there were 35 keepers and the property was 60 acres; he stayed there 2 years and only left because he didn't like the weather; had to deal with **Heathrow Airport** on quarantine issues as this was the staging post for other countries; many confiscated animals, mainly reptiles; the **Gurkhas** engineers from the British **Army** – 30 men for 2 weeks – volunteered at the zoo and designed and built a climbing frame for the gorillas; the gorillas were a very successful breeding group and some were returned to the Congo for release into the wild; this was all paid through the **Aspinal Foundation** and sponsorship from **British Airways**; theFfoundation had several projects in Africa to return animals to the wild; aimed to get sustainable populations in the wild; also bought land in **Indonesia** and **Madagasgar** which was run by local staff; the Foundation was the main source of income; job was advertised in 2007 for a bird keeper at AZ – he did a phone interview; successful in getting job; had been to AZ before for workshops when he was a bird keeper; when he started there were lots of small cages as well as several large enclosures; a lot of round 8 was lost to make way for the pandas; under a zoo restructure he became **Senior Keeper** in birds with **Gayl Males** as **Team Leader**; he has been doing this job for 8-9 months but is used to senior roles; he has to deal with stock, all staff issues, collection planning, improving standards and projects; he has high standards and leads by example; he has regular dialogue with staff and talks to them daily without the need for regular meetings; he constantly passes on information he receives from all parts of the zoo; at Port Lympne he spent the first 2 hours of each day going to every section of the zoo and talked to all staff so that they had the opportunity to raise any issues with him and developed a good camaraderie with them; he had very few staff problems; at AZ he has 7-9 staff; there are always work injuries including back injuries from repetitive shovelling and lifting; if staff are working with injuries this can lead to resentment by other staff who have to carry the extra workload; he regularly has to do PR and TV/radio interviews, he is ok with this as it is part of the job;

	he is better one to one than with a crowd; daily talks are given by keepers at pelicans, penguins, walk through aviary and macaw free flight; additional talks also given at cassowary and flamingo in school holidays; subjects include training, camouflage, threats, age, predators and food; keepers determine what they will talk about including habitat destruction, logging to make palm oil; the large walk through aviary has holes in the roof and this limits the species that can be held; caused by not trimming plants and is not a priority to fix; need diplomacy to work with maintenance and horticulture to get it fixed; the **Lyrebird Aviary** was destroyed to make room for for the pandas and it was hard to re-house some of the birds; **Chook** the lyrebird was about 32 years old when he died, he had a worldwide reputation for his large repertoire of sounds; less birds are now being bred and they are harder to get leading to less diversity; if enough birds can't be obtained from zoos private accredited dealers are used to swap birds; issues in keeping birds – mites, tape worm, putting out baits, control of possums; when the **Greater Flamingo** was attacked by several teenagers a few years ago [2009] he heard to call out 'Flamingo down' and found the bird lying on the ground bleeding from its beak and saw three youths running away; they thought it would die from its injuries; the vet **Wayne Boardman** put it in a sling hung from the ceiling; its beak had caved in; it was heavily medicated; it was aged about 76-78; all staff were very upset; suffers badly from arthritis and receives regular shots of anti-inflammatories which work quite well; keepers are used to weekly deaths of birds and have become desensitised; the cassowary is aged about 15 and has some health issues, may have been caused by stress from the long queues to see the panda outside its enclosure; they are trying to get another cassowary to keep it company; its previous mate died; there are only 1000 left in the wild and they hope to get one from a breeder in **Cairns**; the **Parrot Block** started with 19 cages that have been altered to 4 large habitat enclosures; their options are limited because of the dominance of some birds; the **Gouldian Finches** are prolific breeders and breed all year round; a new training facility is being built at the zoo which will become a specialist unit; **Orange Bellied parrots** are part of a conservation program that the zoo is heavily involved in; also part of the **Regent Honey Eater** breeding program; must have sufficient staff to be involved in conservation; limited amount of hand-rearing done – must be of value to the species or for education purposes for the public; a display has to pay its way; the zoo **Master Plan** and **Collection Plan** are about to be released so the future is unknown at the moment; he aims to expand the bird show; he likes working with birds.

	END